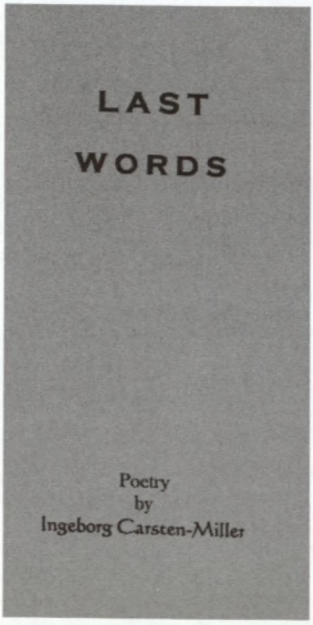
Elfe Vallaster-Dona

German-American Literary Reviews

Last Words.
By Ingeborg Carsten-Miller. Silver Spring, MD: Carmill, 2003. 31 pages.

Thomas Mann's Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress.
Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. New German-American Studies, vol. 25. Bern: Peter Lang, 2003. 132 pages. $31.95.

I Hate Junk Food: A Satire and Other Short Pieces
By Dirk Holger. Silver Springs, MD: Beckham House , 2003. 179 pages. $12.95.



The latest volume of poetry by **Ingeborg Carsten-Miller**, a native of Pomerania and presently living in Maryland, entitled *Last Words* (cf. a poem with the same title by German-American poet Sylvia Plath and the work of Charlotte Bronte), was read at the Legacy College of the University of Maryland in May of 2003 proving again that poetry is alive and still interests listeners. This is her ninth self-published book and contains 14 poems that all center around the topic of writing ("About Writing," "Many Books to Read," "Award Winner"), memories ("At Midnight"), and above all the wisdom that often is associated with "last words" ("Novissima Verba," Mother," "Simple Search," "You Can't," "Smile"). The volume also includes a number of nature poems ("Why Can't We," "Weather Assault by Night," "Is It?" and "Tell Me Spring") which do not have any specific German-American context, but are rather traditional poems written in free verse. Except for the first strophe

of "Smile" (which is immediately translated into English in the next strophe), all poems are written in English.

One of her most promising poem uses the Latin phrase "Novissima Verba" in its title, which translates to "last words," making the connection to the title of the volume. The reader is immediately intrigued thinking to hear about the most profound dying words of ultimate and final wisdom. We agree that a poem is probably the most appropriate way to commemorate the death of a cherished person by remembering their last words.1 Last words are generally a keepsake, a memory, showing a unique perspective of how a person saw the world or how a person's relationship was to the dying. By using the Latin phrase "Novissima Verba," the poet adds an added dimension, something extraordinary. The tone of the poem itself, however, is too informal, conversational for somebody in a dying situation.

"Novissima Verba"

"Would you really want
to go so soon?"
I said to her

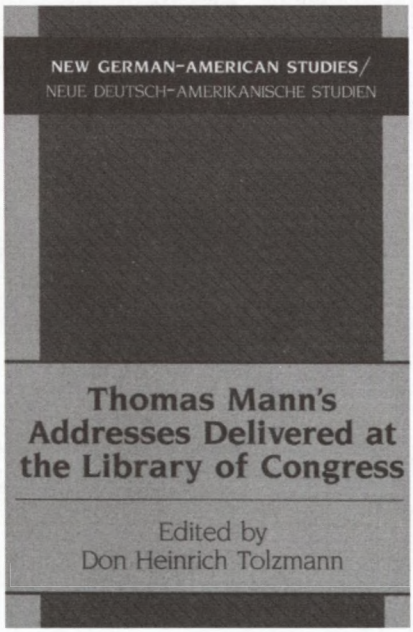
who stood lingering
in the door
not quite ready
it seemed
at that moment.

"There are still
a few things
that need to be done
before you leave
for good."
"Yes," she nodded
with a vertical frown
on her forehead.

"I know-
I just wonder
whether they are
really
that important
before dying-" (10-11)

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller's "Last Words" poem does not contain motivational, inspiring, deep and final thoughts, but rather narrates an ordinary dialogue in lively, every-day language. This person dies fully conscious and does not see the need to end

with cryptic, memorable quotes. In another poem, "Many Books to Read," the lyrical I is concerned to find enough time to write all the poems that need to be written before time runs out ("who can say / how much time / is left" 15). The answer is given in the closing poem, "Smile": ("and/ what remains/ is just a/ smile: 29).



Thomas Mann (1875-1955), the German-born essayist, was a cultural critic, and novelist who lived as an exile in Southern California from 1936 to 1947. He visited Germany for the first time after the war in 1947, but returned to the U.S. He became a U.S. citizen in 1944 and supported the Democratic president Roosevelt. Although Mann had become an American citizen, he visited both East and West Germany several times. Despite many invitations from Germany to return to his homeland, he refused. In 1952, during the McCarthy era, he moved to Switzerland, where he remained until his death.

The winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929 owed much of his fame to works such as *Buddenbrooks (*1900), *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912; *Death in Venice*), and *Der Zauberberg* (1924; *The Magic Mountain).* His theoretical work, however, such as the speeches at the Library of Congress, contributed much more to "the image of Germany in general and German culture in particular, both of which played an important role in the history of German-American relations" (*Thomas Mann's Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress*, xi).

Don Heinirch Tolzmann, librarian of the special German-American collection in Cincinnati and president of the German American Society, republished five speeches given by Thomas Mann, who could be classified as German-American. Tolzmann informs us in the introduction to his book, *Thomas Mann's Addresses Delivered to the Library of Congress*, that the "Library of Congress was an appropriate place for Thomas Mann to have delivered the addresses contained in this volume, as not only was he Consultant in Germanic Literature, but the Library's collection of German materials was the largest in the U.S., and one of the largest in the world" (ix). Mann remained in that office for three years, but never fully broke his ties with the Library of Congress until his death in 1955.

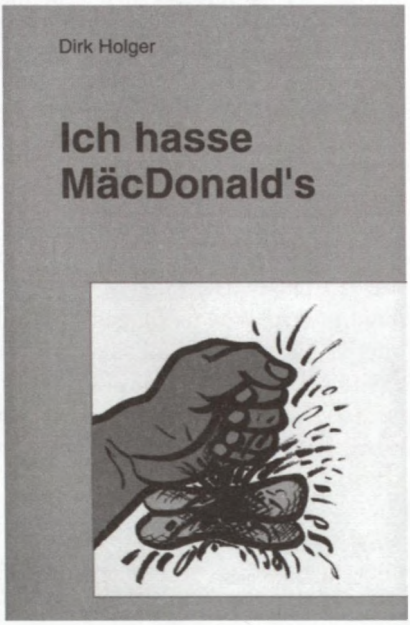
Becoming the Library of Congress's Consultant in Germanic Literature, meant that Thomas Mann had to advise the library in questions dealing with Germanic Literature and giving regular speeches in Washington, D.C., at the Library's Coolidge Auditorium. According to Tolzmann these addresses could draw as many as a thousand listeners, and therefore Thomas Mann reached a wide audience with his speeches.

What makes these speeches particularly valuable is its author's knowledge of the political and intellectual climate both in Europe and America. At times, Thomas Mann points out how some German ideas can differ from the ideas that are already in this country.

The five speeches focus on "The Themes of Joseph Novels" (1-21), "The War and the Future" (21-45), "Germany and the Germans" (45-67), "Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Light of Contemporary Events" (67-105), and "Goethe and Democracy" (105-32). Mann is able to abstract from his literary work and find a model for human interaction by emphasizing the "European culture" and the "American air of life" (19). He enlivens his speeches with real examples from the world. He sheds light on the question what it means to depart from the old country and enter a new one. In the first speech he uses a description of the tetralogy novel, *Joseph and His Brothers*, only as a starting point to arrive at a concept of human behavior that Thomas Mann describes as: "In the idea of humanity, the human idea, the sense for the past and that for the future, tradition and revolution form a strange and, to my mind, infinitely, attractive mixture" (17). In "The War and the Future" Mann concentrates on freedom and justice and "the question of the common responsibility of the German people for the misdeeds of the Nazi" (27).The most interesting speech for scholars of German-American studies is the speech entitled "Germany and the Germans" which Thomas Mann delivered in 1945 almost one year after having become an American citizen. For Mann, becoming an US citizen does not conflict with his original German citizenship: "As an American I am a citizen of the world – and that is in keeping with the original nature of the German, notwithstanding his seclusiveness, his timidity in the face of the world, and it is difficult to say whether this timidity is rooted in arrogance or in an innate provincialism, an international social inferiority complex, - probably in both" (48). In trying to define German culture he describes what the "very German figure" is (51). From the theologian Martin Luther to the literary figure of Faust, to the dramatist Goethe to the philosopher Nietzsche to the sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider, Mann points out their typical German character. The German concepts of liberty and nation are then explored. Mann relates his national character to an understanding of the Reformation and the French Revolution, since according to him, "all German revolutions failed" (58). This chapter in particular raises many important points and offers insights into the national German character form the point of view of Thomas Mann, the cultural critic.

Tolzmann, a distinguished scholar in the field of German-American studies, has made these speeches available again to the general public after they have long been out of print (they were orginally published as *Thomas Mann's Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress, 1942-1949* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1963) and thus he contributes to our knowledge of German immigration, the political and economic sentiment among German-Americans of the time, and their social structure. His highly informative foreword and introduction with notes make scholars of German-American Studies curious as to the other treasures that might be found if they researched other German materials in the Library of Congress.

Dirk Holger: "I Hate McDonalds"
Reviewed by Dana Fleetham



In a modern day filled to the brim with convenience, it sometimes seems as if we will stop at nothing until we are thoroughly successful at bending this world to our conception of time. Philosophers, writers, and psychologists have all questioned this desire, yet still we plow ahead on a steady diet of 24-hour shopping, food made hot to order in seconds, and of recent, even television shows that can be brought up to watch on demand, any time of the day. Most of us do not make our own clothes, wash our own dishes, cook our own food, or medicate ourselves when we are ill. Being infinitely busy, we save our time like misers…but for what? Can we really *save* time, to spend it later? Is it truly better to hand over our lives to automation and expediency?

Author Dirk Holger doesn't seem to think so. With charming wit and deft manipulation of language, Holger asks us to examine this concept, this "saving of time." What does it mean? A German native, Holger has been astounded by the very speed with which American's seek to live their lives, seemingly unencumbered by the need for patience whatsoever. In several short satirical pieces on life in "fast lane America," he encourages readers to join him on an exploration of American culture, quietly pointing out along the way that we might not need to rush so much after all.

In a particularly interesting piece entitled "I Hate McDonalds," Holger depicts a common scene in the lives of many school-age children and their chaperones as they embark upon a class field trip. Gone are the days of a kid bringing the ubiquitous brown-bag lunch brought along in their backpack. Now a student is far more likely to take a quick meal at a fast-food restaurant instead. Holger was along on one of these excursions, and he recalls for us in vivid detail the absurdity he found in eating there, with a tale told with all the bittersweet humor of one looking deeper into a situation because they are so far removed from it. His ability to look at engrossing elements of American culture, while remaining objective, gave this piece an entertaining edge.

That same quality allowed Holger to make his own observations on events in American history, as well as the effects of American foreign policy on the remainder of the world. He comments on the tragic events of September 11, 2001, in "Ashes to Ashes," and on the plight of the Palestinian people in "Intifada." His knack for poetry pulls the reader through both difficult topics, using well-placed words to express the

words and emotion associated with both. It is in pieces like these that Holger's wit is at its best, pricking the senses with fabulous snippets drawn from his skull, spread out for all of us to take in. We are at once mesmerized, happy and sad…it is all a facet of the experience.

The second half of the book is a collection of German folk tales that have been retold by Holger, with hilarious results. Those of German heritage will smirk at the familiarity of the tales that have been given a new lease on life, and those that hail from other lands will simply like reading these delightful, funny stories.

Dirk Holger offers up with this book much more than the title would lead one to believe. He stretches himself as a writer, pulling bits of imaginative prose from his mind to share with us all, gently, humbly, yet at the same time unique and rich in humor. He reminds all of us what it is like to be human, and what is more, he forces us to reflect on what it means to be an American. He compels us to consider the outsider, who can often see so clearly what we in America do not find right under our noses. A thoroughly talented writer, to whom I give five stars!

Wright State University
Dayton, Ohio